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After the fireworks of July Fourth, South Jersey was the setting for a very special parade on Sunday.

To celebrate the recent return of New Jersey National Guard members who had been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan -- the largest deployment of the state National Guard since World War II -- Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3020 hosted a day of activities for the troops.

Included among the returning soldiers being honored were about 20 from Riverside and nearby towns.

"We normally have small going-away parties for them. So this year we decided, "Let's just have one big party when they all get home," " said Post Commander Tom Farrell, 63, a Riverside native now living in Burlington Township.

"As a Vietnam veteran who wasn't welcomed home, I can tell you that we didn't want that to happen to these kids," said Farrell, a Marine Corps veteran who was shot and wounded in Vietnam on Veterans Day in 1966.

Sgt. Harold Melander, 25, a Riverside native now living in Mount Laurel, returned home on May 31 after nine months in Baghdad.

A member of Alpha Company's 50th Brigade, 1-114 Infantry Unit, Melander provided protection for the highest-ranked intelligence officer in the Iraqi theater. It was his first deployment to Iraq, after spending time at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"This post had our going away party here, so it's great we have our welcome home party in the same place," Melander said.

Melander was one of several Riverside High School Class of 2001 graduates deployed together, including 1st Lt. Matthew Neamand, 26, and Sgt. Steven Fuquay, 25, both of Riverside.

"This is awesome. The families in the VFW put together a great showing," said Neamand, a member of the 328th Military Police Company based in Cherry Hill.

Neamand, who got home in early June, served in detainee operations at Camp Cropper near Baghdad during his first deployment to Iraq.

"If I have to go back, I will," he said.

Fuquay, who returned home on May 29, was part of the 50th Brigade's "Foxtrot" unit out of the 250th Brigade Support Battalion. As an intelligence analyst at Camp Bucca, his job was to brief his superiors on threats and find ways to keep the troops safe.

It was Fuquay's first deployment to Iraq, after a stint at Guantanamo. In Iraq, he was accompanied by his younger brother Todd, 23, a specialist in the same unit.

Diane Fuquay, 51, of Riverside, said she lobbied the Army to post her sons together.

"I totally understand the separation," said Diane Fuquay, who met her husband, Steven, when they both served in the Navy.

"The thing that got me through this is that Steve and Todd were together. They weren't going to let anything happen to each other, so I slept good at night," she said.

Following a breakfast of waffles, eggs, bacon and home fries donated by a local merchant, the returning soldiers and their families climbed atop fire engines from Delran, Riverside and Delanco to ride in the parade. The route began near Riverside's Town Hall and ended at the Delran post located just past the boundary line separating the two townships.

A motorcycle escort of the South Jersey Chapter of Warriors' Watch Riders, the Delaware Valley Chapter of Nam Knights and others helped lead the way.

Many Riverside residents waved American flags and held up homemade "welcome home" signs.

Jose Pinho, 37, watching with his wife Maria, 37, and children Andre, 11, and Olivia, 4, said there are no comparable events in his native Portugal.

"It's nice that everybody comes home," he said.

Said Maria Pinho, "Riverside has a lot of people serving and you don't ever know it. So it's nice for the community to unite and honor them."

Kim Albanese, 49, has been in the National Guard for 28 years and would have been deployed to Iraq with this group had she not torn her Achilles' tendon last year.

"I've lived in Riverside all my life and this is the first parade like this going past my house," said Albanese, a full-time military technician.

Following the parade, returning troops, family and friends lined up back at the post for burgers, hot dogs, pulled pork and potatoes. Folks pitched horseshoes and tots romped in a moon bounce while the Riverside String Band played and a DJ spun hits.

Neamand presented the post with an American flag that had flown at Camp Cropper. Welcoming remarks were made by state VFW officials and U.S. Rep. John Adler, D-Cherry Hill, a member of Congress' Veterans Affairs Committee.

"We should keep our freedom precious in our heart. We'll keep doing this -- welcoming back the troops and thanking them -- until everyone is home safe," Adler said.

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